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RELEASED IN PART B1, 1.4(D), B6

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DEPARTMENT OF STATE
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ACTION: VE (02)

INFO: DAND (01) RJ (01) PDAS (01) MM (01) ARA (01) PPC (01) OAS (01)
PPA (01) EPSC (04) DEPSC (01) CO (02) SPA (01) PE (01) EC (01)
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ACTION ARA-00

INFO LOG-00 ACDA-00 ACDE-00 ACQ-00 DODE-00 DOEE-00 SRFP-00
DS-00 H-01 IM-00 TEDE-00 INR-00 IAB-01 L-00
ADS-00 NSAE-00 NSCE-00 OMB-01 OPIC-01 PA-00 PM-00
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R 171246Z MAR 98
FM AMEMBASSY CARACAS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 8[illegible]
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DIA WASHDC
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AMEMBASSY BOGOTA
AMEMBASSY QUITO
AMEMBASSY LIMA

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE
CLASSIFIED BY DEPT. OF STATE, M. GRAFELD, DAS, A/GIS, ACTING
REVIEW AUTHORITY: ADOLPH H EISNER
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DECLASSIFY AFTER: 16 MAR 2023
DATE/CASE ID: 14 JUN 2010 200503654

C O N F I D E N T I A L CARAGAS 000810
E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/10/98

TAGS: PGOV, PREL, VE
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S MEETING WITH IRENE SAEZ

CLASSIFIED BY [redacted] REASON: 1.5 B6
(D).

SUMMARY
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1. (C) LEADING PRESIDENTIAL CONTENDER IRENE SAEZ BELIEVES FORMER COUPSTER HUGO CHAVEZ IS HER ONLY COMPETITION IN THE DECEMBER ELECTIONS. SHE DESCRIBES CHAVEZ'S "CHARISMA AND HONESTY" AS HIS MAJOR ATTRACTIONS, BUT BELIEVES [redacted] B1 WILL ULTIMATELY SINK HIM. SHE NOTED THAT POPULAR DISGUST WITH POLITICAL CORRUPTION HAS LED TO OUTRIGHT REJECTION OF POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE INSTITUTIONS THEY CONTROL--CONGRESS AND THE JUDICIARY--AND IS BEHIND THE POPULARITY OF CHAVEZ'S CALL TO DISSOLVE THE CONGRESS AND DISMANTLE THE JUDICIARY. SHE REFUSES TO CONFRONT CHAVEZ AT THIS TIME, SAYING "THIS WOULD ONLY HELP CHAVEZ AND HURT ME." SHE SAID THE RETICENCE OF THE MAJOR PARTIES TO IDENTIFY PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES INDICATES OPENNESS TO HER CANDIDACY, BUT ONLY AS LONG AS SHE MAINTAINS HER LEAD IN THE POLLS. SHE DESCRIBED HERSELF AS THE ONLY CANDIDATE CAPABLE OF UNITING VENEZUELA'S INCREASINGLY FRAGMENTED PARTIES, MAKING HER THE CANDIDATE WHO CAN GUARANTEE "REFORM AND GOVERNABILITY." SHE UNDERSCORED HER OPENNESS TO THE U.S. AND OUR BILATERAL AGENDA.

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AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH IRENE SAEZ
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2. (C) AMBASSADOR MET WITH IRENE SAEZ FEBRUARY 26, THE DAY OF THE SOLAR ECLIPSE. SAEZ ARRIVED AT THE RESIDENCE FOR BREAKFAST EN ROUTE TO THE AIRPORT AND THE CITY OF MARACAIBO, WHERE SHE HAD CAMPAIGNING AND AN ECLIPSE VIEWING PARTY ON HER SCHEDULE.

POLITICAL COUNSELOR ACCOMPANIED THE AMBASSADOR DURING THE BREAKFAST.

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3. (C) AMBASSADOR PRAISED SAEZ FOR HER MEASURED, UPBEAT CAMPAIGNING IN THE RUN-UP TO THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION SEASON WHICH WILL BEGIN OFFICIALLY ON AUGUST 1. HE TOLD HER THAT HER OUTSPOKEN PUBLIC COMMITMENT TO DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENT AND ITS INSTITUTIONS, WHILE CALLING FOR REFORM OF THE STATE AND BETTER REPRESENTATION, STRIKE A MUCH-NEEDED BALANCE. HE NOTED SAEZ'S SUCCESSFUL VISIT TO NEW YORK TO MEET WITH BANKERS AND OTHER FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS, AND URGED HER NOT TO LOSE SIGHT OF THE IMPORTANCE TO FOREIGN INVESTORS AND COMMENTATORS OF POLICY CONTINUITY IN REGARD TO ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL REFORM. VENEZUELA HAS MADE ENORMOUS PROGRESS UNDER PRESIDENT CALDERA, AMBASSADOR SAID, AND THIS PROGRESS TO BE CONSOLIDATED AND GENED. REGARDING SAEZ'S PLANS TO VISIT WASHINGTON IN THE NEAR FUTURE (DATES FOR THIS TRIP HAVE NOT BEEN FIXED), AMBASSADOR OFFERED HIS ASSISTANCE IN SECURING APPOINTMENTS IN THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH, AND URGED SAEZ TO CHOSE A REPUTABLE AND RELIABLE PROGRAMMER FOR OTHER APPOINTMENTS.

---IRENE LOOKS AT THE ELECTIONS

4. (C) SAEZ SAID THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS WILL BE BETWEEN "ME AND CHAVEZ." SHE DISCOUNTED CANDIDATES SUCH AS CLAUDIO FERMIN AND SALAS ROMER AS NOT HAVING ANY "TRACTION," AND NOTED THAT ONLY HERSELF AND CHAVEZ SHOW ANY ABILITY AT THIS POINT TO ATTRACT VOTERS.

5. (C) SHE ACKNOWLEDGED THAT RECENT POLLS HAVE SHOWN CHAVEZ CREEPING UP ON HER (REFTEL). SHE SAID THIS WAS EXPECTED IN THE SHORT TERM, ESPECIALLY GIVEN CHAVEZ'S PRESENTATION OF HIMSELF AS "THE OPTION FOR CHANGE." SHE ASSERTED THAT CHAVEZ'S GROWTH IN POPULARITY IS AN EXPRESSION OF THE POPULAR REJECTION OF POLITICAL PARTIES AND TRADITIONAL POLITICIANS AS "CORRUPT" AND "INEPT." SHE ALSO CLAIMED THAT HIS POLITICAL PROGRAM, ESPECIALLY HIS CALL TO DISSOLVE THE CONGRESS AND DISMANTLE THE JUDICIARY, HAS RESONANCE AMONG THE ELECTORATE BECAUSE MOST VENEZUELANS VIEW BOTH INSTITUTIONS AS "SNAKE PITS OF CORRUPTION." IN THIS REGARD, SAEZ CONTINUED, CHAVEZ'S GREATEST ASSETS ARE HIS "CHARISMA AND HIS HONESTY."

6. (C) SAEZ ASSERTED THAT CHAVEZ'S NEGATIVES WILL FAR OUTWEIGH HIS POSITIVES IN THE LONG RUN. SHE SAID CHAVEZ IS WORKING HARD TO

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7. (C) SAEZ COMPLAINED THAT CHAVEZ IS "GETTING A FREE RIDE" NOW FROM THE MEDIA AND MANY COMMENTATORS. SHE SAID MANY PEOPLE ARE AFRAID TO ATTACK CHAVEZ AND ARE EXPECTING HER TO BE THE ONE WHO "TAKES HIM ON." HOWEVER, SHE SAID THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT CHAVEZ WANTS AND NEEDS. SHE SAID THAT ANY CONFRONTATION BETWEEN HERSELF AND CHAVEZ AT THIS POINT WOULD "ONLY HELP HIM AND HURT ME." SHE DID ADMIT, HOWEVER, TO HAVING SOME NEGATIVE CAMPAIGNING PLANNED SHOULD CHAVEZ CONTINUE TO OCCUPY A WORRISOME PLACE IN THE POLLS. SHE SAID THE MEMORIES OF FEBRUARY 4, 1992, WHEN CHAVEZ LED THE COUP

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ATEMPT, ARE STILL FRESH IN MANY PEOPLES' MINDS. SHE SAID, IF

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IRENE AND THE MILITARY

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8. (C) IN RESPONSE TO A QUESTION ABOUT HOW SHE IS VIEWED BY THE MILITARY, SAEZ REPLIED, "THEY ARE PROTECTING ME." SHE CLAIMED TO HAVE A "SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP" WITH THE MILITARY BECAUSE OF A YOUTH SPENT AROUND THIS INSTITUTION. SHE NOTED THAT, FOLLOWING HER MOTHER'S DEATH, SHE WENT TO LIVE WITH AN OLDER SISTER WHO WAS MARRIED TO AN AIR FORCE PILOT. SHE SAID SHE GREW UP IN MARACAY, AND LIVED ACROSS THE STREET FROM GENERAL PAREDES MINO, THE FATHER OF THE CURRENT HEAD OF THE AIR FORCE. SHE SAID HER UNCLE WAS ONE OF THE FIRST VENEZUELAN AIR FORCE PILOTS TRAINED TO FLY MIRAGES--SHE MOVED TO FRANCE WITH HER SISTER AND UNCLE WHILE HE WAS BEING TRAINED--AND SHE HAS ALWAYS HAD GOOD RELATIONS WITH THE MILITARY.

IRENE AND THE DEMOCRATIC ACTION PARTY (AD)

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9. (C) SAEZ CLAIMED THAT A SMALL GROUP OPPOSED TO HER CANDIDACY--INCLUDING SOME BUSINESSMEN, SOME MEDIA COMMENTATORS, AND SOME MEMBERS OF THE CURRENT GOVERNMENT--ARE SPREADING RUMORS THAT A SAEZ PRESIDENCY WOULD BE "UNACCEPTABLE" TO THE MILITARY. SHE ALSO ALLEGED THAT THESE SAME GROUPS ARE BEHIND PUBLIC QUESTIONING OF HER ABILITY TO GOVERN IF ELECTED. THIS GROUP IS ALSO QUIETLY PROMOTING THE CANDIDACY OF DEMOCRATIC ACTION PARTY SECRETARY GENERAL LUIS ALFARO. ACCORDING TO SAEZ, ALFARO IS BEING SET UP AS A "SAVIOR" CANDIDATE WHO WOULD STEP IN SHOULD BOTH HER AND CHAVEZ'S CANDIDACIES COLLAPSE.

10. (C) SAEZ CLAIMED THAT THIS STRATEGY WOULD NOT WORK. SHE SAID AD'S DECISION SO FAR NOT TO ATTACK HER, OR DECIDE PUBLICLY WHO ITS CANDIDATE WILL BE, MEANS THAT AD IS STILL "MEASURING" HER. IF SHE CAN MAINTAIN HER LEAD IN THE POLLS, SAEZ CONTINUED, AD WILL HAVE TO THINK LONG AND HARD ABOUT ITS ELECTORAL PROSPECTS. "I AM IN REGULAR CONTACT WITH ALFARO," SHE SAID, "AND I HAVE NOT DISCOUNTED THE POSSIBILITY OF HIS SUPPORT."

COMMENT

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